

## What If

It was pitch white outside. You always hear that it's pitch black when there's not a light in sight. But you never hear pitch white, even on those winter days when all you can see is white.

It was one of those days. December 31st actually. There was a snowstorm that had repainted the world white. It was fitting. After all, it was New Year's Eve. The day before the new year and a new beginning.

I sat next to Cynthia. Reflecting on this and pretending to listen to her. She was very cute. Cute enough that I'd stare at her and fake as if I had heard a word she had said. She had brown hair that came down to her shoulders. She had 'watch out when she opens her mouth a rubber band might pop you in the eye' braces. She had a cute set of eyes. She had a cute mouth. She had a cute little button nose. She had...

"HAROLD," Cynthia yelled. "Are you listening to a word I'm saying?"

"Yeah."

"Really? What did I just say then?"

I looked everywhere but at her for a solid minute before saying, "Words?"

"Wow. Of course. You never listen to anything that I say."

"I'm sorry Cynthia. It's just that... Sometimes I get lost in your eyes."

“Awe you’re so corny Harold.”

I stared out across the park: feigning inattention to her.

“Harold. Harold!” She shouted as she smacked my arm.

“Sorry, it happened again.”

She said, “Lol.”

I remember that Lol. It was imprinted in my mind forever because it was the last time she laughed out loud.

We left the park. We had somewhere to be after all. It was the anniversary of the day before our anniversary. I was taking her to all the places we had spent our first date together. I was corny with a hard k. On that date, I had taken her to the park for a picnic, the zoo, to watch a scary movie, and to finish it off I took her to the botanical garden downtown. During the evening, The dim lights and beautiful plants really set the mood. But, we were on the way to the zoo. Walking side by side hand in hand. It was all cute and sweet, but I wanted to have a little fun. I shoved her back and yelled, “ Last one there pays for the movies”.

I started sprinting. I looked back to see her moving faster than I’ve ever seen her. I guess she really wasn’t trying to pay those popcorn prices. The entrance to the zoo was right ahead. I was almost across the street when I looked back to see her face full of determination to win. I guess that’s why I also noticed a Jeep moving towards her with what looked like determination. It was one of those surreal moments when it seemed as

if time had slowed down and I could do anything and I could maybe stop it and maybe I could save her and then Whump! The Jeep and her collided. The unstoppable force met the very moveable object. She flew upward over the car and her back hit the bike tied there which made her start falling the other way. She tumbled off the car and onto the concrete still. I wanted to scream or to shout or to kill that Jeep owner, but the first thing I did was call 911.

The dispatcher calmly asked, "911 what seems to be your emergency?"

Surprisingly, the calmness of my voice matched hers. "My girlfriend's just been hit by a car. We're outside the entrance of Parkside Zoo. She's in bad shape please hurry."

"Can you tell how she's injured?"

"I'm not sure. She's on the ground and not moving."

"Is the person who hit her still there?"

"Yeah"

"What type of vehicle-"

"Just get here," I said and hung up. I was tired of answering her questions.

I ran over to Cynthia, daring to hope she was alive. There was a small crowd of concerned and nosy people around her. I pushed through them and bent down to her.

"Harold," she cried. "I can't feel my legs."

I froze unsure what to do next. There's no guidebook, no movie, and no advice that can truly prepare you for tragedy. I've watched Titanic and I've even read the Fault

in Our Stars, but to actually see your partner suffering: it's an entirely different experience. As fat teardrops spilled from her, I truly was confused about what to do next. So I did something I didn't usually do. I told her, "It's okay. Everything's gonna be alright."

It was my first time lying to her. It was also my first time crying in front of a crowd. Of course, I didn't wail. I still had my pride in being a man. But I couldn't stop the tears from pouring down my face. It took what seemed like forever, but the ambulance finally arrived. They loaded her up fast. I told them I was her boyfriend and wanted to ride with her. A few minutes later, I was on the passenger side of the ambulance. Sitting there. Praying that Cynthia was going to be okay and wondering if she wasn't. My fingers drummed against the dashboard. I kept looking back trying to glimpse her through the window to the back of the ambulance. I called her mom to let her know what happened and she wailed over the phone and I couldn't really understand anything, but "We're on our way."

With nothing else to do, I just sat there. Contemplating the whole situation. It was my fault. I shouldn't have been playing in the street. But we both chose to do it so really, we shared responsibility, but then again it was probably the driver's fault for not paying attention or... Maybe I should stop thinking. And so, we rushed to the hospital. We went past stoplights, past stop signs, and past police in a rush. The entire time I tried to think of nothing.

We got to Barter Hospital and they rushed her to the emergency room.

Surprisingly her parents were already there. When her mom saw her she turned white and her dad just glared at me. A few moments later, I was sitting in the waiting room.

They let immediate family in because their presence might help the patient. As for me, I

had to sit outside and wait. So, I waited. Then waited. Then I waited and waited and

waited. I don't know how long I sat out there. It could've been 2 hours or 2 forever. I

just sat there. Staring at the plain Jane decor of the room made me restless. The soft-

looking, but spine-contorting chairs had caused me to stand up and start pacing. I

walked from white barren wall to white barren wall. I paced. I then paced. Then paced. I

was going for another walk around when her parents finally came out. Tears fell from

Sarah's blue eyes. She was blonde, white, and built like your average soccer mom. Also

dressed like one too. As for Paul, her father, the only thing I saw in his eyes was anger.

He shared his wife's blonde hair, pale skin, and blue eyes, but they were very different.

He stood 6 feet and looked stern, from his military buzz cut to his Timberland boots.

Yet, the sternest thing about him was the look he was giving me.

"Why?", he yelled at me.

"What"-

"Why!", he cut me off. He grabbed me by the collar and snatched me off my feet.

"Why! Why! Why!", he yelled as he shook me.

He started crying silent tears. Tears from a man so tough... it shakes you. Then again being held three feet off the floor by your shirt does that too.

“Paul stop”, Sarah cried, “ It’s not his fault.”

“Damn you”, he said.

He dropped me so suddenly that my feet didn't quite land on the ground, so instead my ass did. He walked out of the room. I was happy that at least Sarah didn't blame me. It helped me feel less guilty. I got up quickly and went over to Sarah.

“Thanks for defendin-

Pow! She slapped me.

“Shut up Harold. This is your fault. All your fault. Playing in the middle of a fucking road. Just why. Why did you have to hurt my daughter?”

“Sarah. I mean Ms. Railey I'm sorry-

“Yeah, you are sorry. A sorry excuse of a man.”

“Listen-

“I'd prefer it if you didn't visit my daughter. Don't call.”

With that, she just left. I couldn't visit now and me sitting in the waiting helped no one, so I left.

I walked home. I could've called an Uber, but I felt I needed the walk. I set off down the street at a slow pace. I looked around at all the stores and houses, but I wasn't really aware of any of it. My mind was still on Cynthia and all that just happened. I was angry:

at myself, her parents, the driver, and damn near the whole world. That's probably why when I knocked some lady over I kept walking.

Are you

“ Hey, you jerk!”

I“ Hey, you bit- Jessica?”

“Harold? Why are you going around knocking down innocent girls.”

“ Huh?”

“ I said I didn't see you right there. Where are you going?”

“ I was on my way to Starbucks. Aren't you supposed to be with Cynthia.”

“ I was, but then she got hit by a car.”

“Oh my god is she okay?” she asked.

“I'm not really sure”, was my reply.

“You poor thing”, she said as she hugged me, “ Are you going to be okay?”

“My girlfriend's on life support.”

“I'm sorry that's a stupid question. Just know I'm here for you if you need it.”

“ Really, it's crazy that she may just die.”

“ I'm on way to Starbucks ?”

“ I don't know. I feel terrible pretending life is normal while Cynthia may be dying.”

“ I think she would want you to be happy despite what's going on with her”, she argued.

“You don’t know Cynthia.”

“I’ll pay for-”

“Say no more.”

We started walking together toward Starbucks. She started speaking a lot and I started nodding my head a lot. I was trying hard not to think I was doing the wrong thing. Here I was, with my ex-girlfriend. Technically on a date. I had great excuses though: It’s stupid to turn down free food from someone, she wasn’t blaming me for what happened, and Jessica was fun and a great friend. That didn’t stop me from feeling guilty for getting my girlfriend hit by a car, and going out with the one girl she doesn’t want me around. On our anniversary. But I had two options. Suffer in silence at home or have someone distract me from the bad times. I think I chose wisely.

Surprisingly we made it there without her noticing I wasn’t paying her the least bit of attention. This Starbucks had soft lighting and the walls were brown and the floor was too. It gave off nature vibes. We walked up to the counter together and she ordered an espresso while I ordered an iced coffee. We got our coffee and sat down on brown leather chairs. She was staring at me, but not speaking so I took the initiative.

“So... how are you?”

“I’ve been a little depressed lately”, she said.

“Why?”

“Because of you actually.”



“But I haven’t spoken to you in like a year.”

“Exactly”, she stated.

“What! You broke up with me.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t talk to me or at least try to get me back.

“You told me: don’t call, don’t text, you’re ignoring my facetime calls, you’re leaving me on read, fuck me, fuck my mom, fuck all those goofies I hang out with, that I’m a bitch, that-”

“Alright!”, she yelled, “I’ll admit, I said some hurtful things. But I was just trying to hurt you cus I was hurt. I just saw you kissing her and I reacted how any other girlfriend would.”

“I would’ve respected you more had you let me tell my side of the story. How she kissed me without me expecting it.”

“ I know that now. She let me know and everybody else did too... I’m not used to saying this, but I’m sorry Harold. I really am. I miss you, Harold. I wish I had never said those things.”

“ Me too”, I agreed.

She leaned over the table then kissed me. I pushed her off me quickly.

“ What are you doing?”, she asked.

“What are you doing! That apology doesn’t erase the fact that I’m in a relationship. Or that I care about my girlfriend.”

“ I just thought... You acted like you still cared about me”, she yelled.

“ Jess calm down. I do care about you. I never forgot about you. Hell, I still wanted to be with you all this time. But I can't just betray her. It's just not something I can do. Despite how I feel about you or anyone.”

“Alright. I can respect that”, she huffed, “But if she wasn't in the picture... Would I be?”

“ Damn near”, I said. “Damn near”

“I gotta go to work now”, she said.

“ Oh yeah? Where do you work?”, I asked.

“At Barter Hospital.”

“That's where Cynthia is. Make sure she's alright will you.”, I told her.

“ Alright”

Cynthia died that night. It was due to complications of some kind. Sometimes I wonder if it was natural complications or Jessica complications. The things we do for love... I hope and pray that she didn't do it. At the same time, I hate myself for even thinking that my wife could do that. Yeah, I married Jessica. Not then and there, but after a few years of a loving and caring relationship, I decided that she was somebody I could spend a lifetime with. I'm still happy and thoughtful and corny. Maybe I haven't been married long enough to become bitter and argumentative with my wife. Or maybe we'll remain

that wonder couple. The couple every couple wants to be and makes relationship goals based on. I hope so. I hope a lot. And sometimes I wonder. What if?

I found myself in a place I hadn't been in for a year- sad and standing outside of Jessica's door. Before I could work up the nerve to knock the door swung open.

It was Jessica. Brown hair blue eyes. I stared at her as she glared at me. "Hey," I said breaking the short silence.

"Why are you here?" She asked.

"You remember when you said whenever I was trouble you'd come swooping in like supergirl." . Im not sure."

"Well I'm sure I need to be rescued right now. "

She rolled her eyes.

" come in."

Her room was a homage to nikki minaj. Posters and pink littered.

The city center may have been under gray clouds, but my skies were red.